

Punctuation

15 The sentence

- A** A sentence begins with a capital letter and ends with a full stop, a question mark, or an exclamation mark.

	Punctuation	Example
Statement:	Full stop	<i>It's a good idea to book early.</i>
Imperative:	Full stop	<i>Send me a postcard.</i>
Question:	Question mark	<i>Have you booked a holiday?</i>
Exclamation:	Exclamation mark	<i>How wonderful!</i>

NOTE

An exclamation can have the form of a statement, imperative, or negative question. > Finder 12

Go away! You're annoying me!
Wasn't that fun!

- B** If a question has no inversion, we still use a question mark.
You've booked a holiday?

But we do not use a question mark after an indirect question when the main clause is a statement.

Nicola asked me if we'd booked a holiday.

A request in the form of a question usually has a question mark.
Could you please send me a brochure?

There is a question mark after a question tag.
It's nice here, isn't it?

16 Punctuation between main clauses

- A** There are a number of ways of punctuating two main clauses.

We can put a full stop between them and make two separate sentences.
Pluto was discovered relatively recently. It is the smallest planet.

We can put a semi-colon between the clauses.
Pluto was discovered relatively recently; it is the smallest planet.

We can link the clauses with *and*, *but*, or *so* and use a comma.
Pluto was discovered relatively recently, and it is the smallest planet.

When the verb in the second clause comes directly after *and* or *but*, we do not need to use any punctuation.

Pluto was discovered relatively recently and is the smallest planet.

A full stop or semi-colon is used to present the information as two separate items. A comma or no punctuation links the two clauses more closely.

- B** Clauses linked by *and*, *but*, or *so* can be without a comma, especially if they are short.

Pluto is a long way away and it's very cold.

But if the clause does not begin with a linking word, we must use a full stop or semi-colon.

Pluto is a long way away. It's also very cold.

(NOT *Pluto is a long way away, it's also very cold.*)

- C** We can use a dash between clauses, but it is rather informal.

Pluto was discovered relatively recently – it is the smallest planet.

We can use either a dash or a colon before a clause which is an explanation.

Pluto is the coldest planet – it is the furthest from the sun.

Pluto is the coldest planet: it is the furthest from the sun.

A dash is rather informal.

17 Sub-clauses and phrases

We often put a comma where there would be a pause in speech. The use of commas also depends on the grammatical structure of a sentence, but the rules for using commas are not very exact. In general, we can use them around an adverbial phrase or clause. Commas are more likely around longer phrases or clauses than short ones.

- A** We can use a comma after an adverbial clause or phrase at the beginning of a sentence.

After the guests had all left, we had to tidy up.

After their departure, we had to tidy up.

Afterwards, we had to tidy up.

The comma is more likely if the adverbial is long. After a short phrase there is often no comma.

Afterwards we had to tidy up.

A comma is much less usual when the adverbial comes at the end of the sentence.

We had to tidy up after the guests had left.

We had to tidy up afterwards.

We do not normally use a comma before an infinitive of purpose.

People come here to look round the market.

B Commas are usual with linking adverbs, truth adverbs, and comment adverbs.

*There were no complaints, **however**.*

***On the whole**, it was a success.*

*No damage was done, **luckily**.*

***Yes**, we did enjoy it.*

*Everyone, **as a result**, was feeling pretty tired.*

When something is added as an afterthought, we can use a comma, a dash, or brackets.

*My husband does the cooking, **sometimes**.*

*I'd love a holiday – **if I could afford it**.*

*Everything will be OK (**I hope**).*

NOTE

The name of the reader/listener is separated off by commas.

Alex, could I have a word with you?

*I hope to see you soon, **Melanie**.*

C A noun clause is not separated off by commas.

*It is a fact **that there are more cars in Los Angeles than people**.*

*It's obvious **where we went wrong**.*

This includes indirect speech.

*We know **the earth goes round the sun**.*

*Everyone was wondering **what to do**.*

For punctuation in direct speech, > 18.

D An identifying relative clause is not separated off.

*The person **who invented the light bulb** was a genius.*

But an adding clause has commas. It can also have dashes or brackets.

*Edison, **who invented the light bulb**, was a genius.*

For details about the different kinds of relative clause, > Finder 267.

The same rules apply to a phrase coming after a noun. If the phrase identifies which one we mean, we do not use commas.

*The children **up in the trees** got a better view than those down below.*

(Some of the children were up in the trees.)

*The children, **up in the trees**, got a better view than the adults.*

(All the children were up in the trees.)

When one noun phrase comes after another and both refer to the same thing, they are 'in apposition'. When the second phrase identifies what the first one is referring to, we do not use a comma.

*The composer **Irving Berlin** couldn't read music.*

When the second phrase adds extra information, we use a comma.

***Irving Berlin**, the famous composer, couldn't read music.*

- E** We use a dash or colon before a phrase which adds the missing information or gives an explanation.

*Only one American President has been unmarried – James Buchanan.
The product is available in three colours: white, green, and blue.*

- F** In a list of more than two things, we use commas between them. The last two items are linked by *and* or *or*. Often we do not put a comma before *and* or *or*.

*The Channel Islands are Jersey, Guernsey, Alderney(,) and Sark.
You can have boiled potatoes, mashed potatoes(,) or chips.*

We put commas in a list of adjectives when they have similar kinds of meaning.
a narrow, steep, winding road

Otherwise we do not use commas.
an ugly old wooden hut

18 Direct speech

- A** Direct speech means quoting someone's words. In this scene from a story, a police officer called Hawes wants to question someone.

CAN I COME IN?

He knocked again, and this time a voice said, 'Who's there?' The voice was pitched very low; he could not tell if it belonged to a man or a woman.

'Charlie?' he said.

'Charlie ain't here right now,' the voice said. 'Who's that, anyway?'

'Police officer,' Hawes said. 'Mind opening the door?'

'Go away,' the voice said.

'I've got a warrant for the arrest of Charles Harrod,' Hawes lied. 'Open the door, or I'll kick it in.'

(Excerpted from Ed McBain *Bread*, © 1974 by Hui Corporation. Reprinted by arrangement with the author.)

Direct speech is inside quotation marks, also called 'quotes' or 'inverted commas'. Single quotes are more usual in British English.

'Police officer,' he said.

Double quotes are more usual in American English.

"Police officer," he said.

- B** To identify the speaker we use a phrase like *he said*, separated by a comma. This usually comes after the direct speech.

'Police officer,' Hawes said.

But we can identify the speaker first. When this happens we use either a comma or a colon before the direct speech.

Hawes said, 'Police officer'.
Hawes said: 'Police officer'.

When the direct speech is longer, we can mention the speaker in the middle of it.

'Open the door,' he said, 'or I'll kick it in.'

NOTE

For inversion, e.g. *said Hawes*, > Finder 258D.

- C** We can use quotes around a word to draw special attention to it or to show that it was first used by someone else.

The so-called 'hotel' was just an old shed.

All Americans have the right to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'.

We can put quotes around a title.

'Lord of the Rings' was filmed in New Zealand.

Or a title can be printed in a different type such as italics: *Lord of the Rings*.

19 The apostrophe

We use an apostrophe in the possessive form of a noun. > Finder 132

Molly's cousin a students' hostel

We also use an apostrophe in a short form to show that part of a word has been left out. > Finder 290

I've finished. It's four o'clock.

20 The hyphen

A hyphen shows that two words belong together. The rules about when to use a hyphen are not very exact. In general, hyphens are used more in British English than in American English.

- A** A hyphen is usual in compound expressions before a noun.

inner-city schools a no-win situation

out-of-date equipment a thirty-year-old mother of four

But when these expressions do not come before a noun, they are usually written as separate words.

schools in the inner city equipment that is out of date

- B** We use a hyphen in compound numbers below 100.

forty-seven five hundred and eighty-nine

- C** Some compound nouns are written with a hyphen.

ten minutes to take-off act in self-defence

But most combinations are written either as one word or as two separate words.

*stage a **walkout** launch the **lifeboat***
*a famous **film star** your **life history***

There is a lot of variation in how words are written. For example *motorbike* is usually written as one word, but *motor bike* and *motor-bike* also occur sometimes. In general there is a trend away from using hyphens in compound nouns.

NOTE

We generally use a hyphen in a letter + noun combination.

*take an **X-ray** send an **e-mail***

TIP

Use a hyphen only in words where you have seen it used before or in contexts where you know it is necessary. Use it in a phrase before a noun, e.g. *a **hard-luck** story*. Do not put it in commonly-used noun compounds like *an **airport*** or *a **mobile phone***.

D We usually use a hyphen after the prefix *non-*.

*fly **non-stop** a **non-event** **non-payment** of taxes*

But we do not normally use a hyphen after *un-*, *in-*, or *dis-*.

unfriendly invisible disorder

There are other prefixes that are sometimes followed by a hyphen.

*an **anti-hero** my **ex-husband** in **semi-darkness***

But there are many exceptions and no exact rules.

*an **anticlimax** sit in a **semicircle***

For more examples of words with prefixes, > 8.

NOTE

a We use a hyphen between two vowels which are the same, e.g. *re-enter*, *co-operate*.

b We use a hyphen before a capital letter. We do not usually form a single word with a capital letter in the middle.

***anti-British** feeling the **Trans-Siberian** Railway*

E We use a hyphen when a word is divided between one line of print or handwriting and the next.

*It is important to **under-**
stand that the situation
is ...*

There are rules about where to divide a word. Some dictionaries mark the place like this: **under-stand**.

21 Capital letters

We use a capital letter in the following ways.

- A** At the beginning of a sentence.

How are you?

- B** When we write the pronoun *I*.

What have I done?

- C** With the names of people.

Tom Hanks Julia Roberts

Titles also have a capital letter.

*Mrs Brown Uncle Simon Doctor Owen/Dr Owen
Captain Cook our Chief Executive Lord Lucan*

We write *Dear Uncle Simon* and *Dear Dr Owen*, but we usually write *my uncle* and *the doctor*. With other jobs such as president, chief executive, or prime minister, the traditional rule is that we use a capital letter only when referring to a specific person but a small letter when the reference is more general.

President Bush returns to Washington tomorrow.

How many US presidents have there been?

However, usage does not always follow this rule.

NOTE

Father and *mother* do not usually have a capital letter, but *dad* and *mum* can be either with or without a capital.

My father is a dentist./My mother is a dentist.

My Dad/My dad is a dentist./My Mum/My mum is a dentist.

Hello, Father./Hello, Mother. (old-fashioned)

Hello, Dad./Hello, dad./Hello, Mum./Hello, mum.

- D** With the names of places.

Europe South America New York Oxford

When a noun is part of a name, it has a capital letter too.

the River Aire the Humber Bridge Fifth Avenue Sydney Opera House

- E** With some expressions of time such as the names of days and months.

Tuesday New Year's Day April

With historical periods and important events.

the Middle Ages the First World War the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty

- F** With organisations and companies.

the United Nations Standard Oil Computech Computer Systems

NOTE

The names of companies are without a capital in website addresses.

G In the titles of books, newspapers, films, and so on.

Animal Farm The Daily Telegraph Gladiator Big Brother

Grammatical words such as *and*, *a*, *of*, and *the* often start with a small letter when they are not the first word of the title.

Four Weddings and a Funeral Lord of the Rings

In the headings to chapters, reports, leaflets, news articles, etc.

Getting to know your computer Policeman shot dead

In such headings it is common for only the first word to have a capital letter.

H In most abbreviations formed from the first letters of each word.

the BBC (= British Broadcasting Corporation)

I With nationality words

a French singer learning Greek